

REPRESENTATION

AND SPATIAL PRACTICES

IN URBAN SOUTH AFRICA

→ *Leora Farber*

This collection has evolved from and out of the papers, discussions, site-presentations, video evening programme and photographic exhibition all of which formed components of the *Johannesburg and Megacity Phenomena* colloquium. The colloquium was held at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) from 9-11 April 2008. It was hosted by the UJ's Research Centre (RC), *Visual Identities in Art and Design*, in collaboration with the editors of *The New Encyclopaedia Project* (NEP) – a project conducted in conjunction with the British-based journal *Theory, Culture & Society*.¹ A focus of

the colloquium was on the host of new, intensified, global urban phenomena which megacities embody – phenomena which not only affect the future prosperity and stability of a city, but also unsettle many traditionally held concepts about cities – and on exploration of the complex ways in which Johannesburg interfaces with these global megacity phenomena. Whilst issues of global megacity phenomena were well covered by international speakers such as Eyal Weizman, Abdoumalik Simone and Li-Shiqiao, as well as by their respondents, Achille Mbembe, Scott Lash and Michael Keith, many of the South African presenters chose to explore urban conditions, and particularly those of Johannesburg, from specifically localised perspectives. These presentations offered fascinating accounts of current interdisciplinary research being done on and around South African urbanism. Many of the presentations were underpinned by, or suggestive of, present disjunctures and fissures within the fabric of the urban, which were framed in the shadows of South Africa's historic specificity.

The colloquium offered the following, varied platforms for presentation:

→ **Formal presentations of papers.**

→ **A exhibition** entitled *Cities in Crisis: Photographs of the South African Urban Landscape*, curated by

Michael Godby and Cape-Town based photographer Dave Southwood.

→ **A one-day city tour of greater Johannesburg**, hosted by Neil Fraser of *Urban Inc.*

→ **A video evening**, entitled *Too close for comfort: belonging and displacement in the work of South African video artists*. The programme was curated by Leora Farber and Lee-At Meyerov.

As co-organiser of the colloquium (together with Ryan Bishop – one of the four NEP editors), and as editor, my initial conception of this collection was that it would take the form of conference / colloquium proceedings, presenting a range of contributions derived from the above-listed platforms, which would have been representative of the key issues and themes presented and discussed. However, as contributions were being submitted, exciting additional material, both visual and textual, continually surfaced. This proliferation of work, as well as the localised specificities of the contributions, caused me to suspect that, perhaps the potential value and strength of this volume no longer lay in close proximity to debates around ways in which Johannesburg engages with, manifests, or subverts global megacity phenomena. Instead, it became increasingly apparent that, if the collection is to make a meaningful contribution to the emergent field of work being done on local urbanism, its value would

hinge around two aspects: firstly, ways in which the collection presents instances of spatial and representational engagement with local urbanism, and with Johannesburg in particular; and secondly, ways in which it attempts to tap into and 'give voice to' what might be identified as a new stream of currently emergent, interdisciplinary modes of localised urban practices and production.

These modes of urban practices and production present an exciting junction between disciplines and media. Since 1994, forms of engagement with South African cities, and particularly Johannesburg, have emerged as critically relevant in light of post-apartheid urban transformation processes. This is reflected in research currently being done by academics and applied researchers in the humanities and the social sciences, across disciplines such as architecture, design, history, cultural studies, literary studies, sociology, urban geography, urban studies, visual arts (including critical art theory and visual culture) and through analysis of, or practical engagement with media/modes of representation such as photography, video art, graffiti, public art and community art projects, to name but a few. This collection seeks to explore and highlight this critical juncture by bringing together a selection of research being done on spatial practices and representation of the urban in South Africa, from a variety of interdisciplinary positions and modes of production.

Whilst the majority of the contributions to the collection emerge from the visual arts, and others deal with issues of spatial practices, both predominantly reflect white experiences thereof. In this sense it is interesting that the collection reflects a heterogeneity of material despite what might be considered a homogeneity of intellectual, theoretical and disciplinary approaches and backgrounds. And yet, despite certain heterogeneities, as I propose later in this introduction, there are several common thematic which interweave throughout the contributions.

This collection comprises a selection of essays and photo-essays developed from papers presented at the colloquium together with additional materials. As such, it contains both visual and textual research, much of which is practice-based.² Working within this framework, artists', architects' and designers' contributions, which take the form of photo-essays and visuals, have been given equal weighting in relation to the essays. In so doing, I hope to encourage and prompt dialogues and exchanges between the various modes of textual and visual representation used. Use of both modes of

representation has been deployed in support of the RC's commitment to practice-based research.

The thematic of the colloquium and this collection correlate with and support the RC's research focus, *Visual Identities in Art and Design*. Direct correlations between the sub-programme (*Re*)*Designing the Environment*, which falls under the RC/National Research Foundation Research Niche Area, *Visualising Identities in a Post-Colonial Environment* and contributions to this collection can be discerned. Within this sub-programme, researchers are invited to engage with ways in which meaning is produced through formal, stylistic, aesthetic and material elements and thus, how meaning is constituted within visual representation. Further, under this sub-programme, Johannesburg as an example of a Pan-African city, invites critical engagement. As a Pan-African space which encompasses, amongst other tensions, those between migrant / Diasporic / permanent residents; rural / urban; inner city / suburban, the city may be considered as a 'living entity'; a resource upon which its inhabitants draw on and feed off in order to negotiate their identities. Art and design in the public domain critically engages with the way in which the city's polyglot identities are constructed and articulated, often embodying different kinds of expressive cultures, which, through contact with one another, offer new, dynamic possibilities. These identities are constantly in flux, contingent and open-ended, yet can be momentarily framed.

The collection is loosely divided into two interrelated sections. In the first section, a selection of essays which deal with particular spatial practices in urban South Africa are presented. The second section deals with representations of space through analyses of the work of selected South African artists and visual practitioners. This section is divided into two loosely grouped subsections. The first subsection presents a range of textual-essays and photo-essays, which highlight ways in which South African artists, using a variety of media, negotiate their relationships to urban space, particularly that of inner-city Johannesburg. Given the predominance and intense critical engagement of artists and/or academics using photography as a means of exploring urban conditions, and again, particularly those of the inner-city of Johannesburg, the second subsection features textual-essays which discuss the work of selected South African photographers, including David Goldblatt and Guy Tillim, both of whom are represented on the *Cities in Crisis* exhibition. This exhibition is featured in this subsection through visual documentation of the works and through contextualising essays by Michael Godby

and Matthew Barac. The latter was initially written as a framing text for the exhibition. These contextualising essays are followed by two critical reviews of the exhibition, by Rory Bester and Anthea Buys respectively. The subsection concludes on an (inconclusive) 'Note from the Visitor's Book' by Stephen Hobbs.

The appendixes contain an overview of the *Johannesburg and Megacities Phenomena* colloquium, written by Ryan Bishop and myself, and a visual spread of the city tour. Bishop's essay 'What does it mean to occupy the house of your enemy: thoughts on the megacities colloquium in Johannesburg', in which he provides insightful reflections on the key themes which were explored at the colloquium is also included as an appendix. Li-Shiqiao's essay 'Chinese Cities as Megacities' is included as an example of a paper presented at the colloquium which highlights phenomena prevalent in Chinese cities which may be identified with global megacities.

Although the textual-essays and photo-essays dealing with representation of the urban and urban spatial practices are loosely grouped into discrete sections based on topic for ease of reading, in my conception of the collection, these themes are tightly interwoven. Questions regarding ways in which space can be represented and practices within space are intrinsically linked, as both represent attempts to conceive of spatiality in terms of its creative potential – a factor which serves to trouble easy distinctions between them. Many of the contributions, from both those engaged in applied and/or academic research, and from those working with spatial practices or with modes of visual representation, pose particular challenges to questions of representation itself. For instance, projects such as Mocke Jansen van Veuren's and Theresa Collins' *Minutes* (2007), addresses both questions of space and how to articulate or represent the space in question simultaneously.

French philosopher, Henri Lefebvre's (1991) conceptions of 'spatial practice' (how space is produced and used in particular societies) and 'representations of space' or 'abstract space' (conceived space, the space of scientists and urban planners) underpin many of the contributions.³ For Lefebvre (1991:39), representational or abstract space is

space which is directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users', but also of some artists and perhaps of those, such as [sic] a few writers and philosophers, who describe and aspire to do no more than describe.

Therefore, in Lefebvre's terms, representational space is dominated space, which is passively experienced. It is space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate.⁴ Yet, in seeming contradiction to the descriptive factuality he ascribes to representational space, Lefebvre also sees it as a kind of spatiality which draws on cultural and historical sources, and which contains the potential for, and memory of, ways of living in spaces other than those dictated by the dominant order. (Robinson 1998:7D)

As an alternative to representational space, Lefebvre proposes the conception of 'differential space' – a heterogeneous space characterised by difference and diversity. (Robinson 1998:7D) He (1991:52) argues that in order to construct a 'new society', it is necessary to construct a 'new space' and proposes that this reconstruction can take place from within the structures of the 'old': "... abstract space carries within itself the seeds of a new kind of space ... inasmuch as abstract space tends towards the elimination of existing differences or peculiarities, a new space cannot be born (produced) unless it accentuates differences".

In her article '(Im)mobilizing space – dreaming of change' published in Hilton Judin and Ivan Vladislavić's seminal text *blank_Architecture, Apartheid and After* (1998), which accompanied the watershed exhibition of the same title,⁵ Jennifer Robinson points out that South African cities were prime examples of 'abstract spaces', given that they were built as manifestations of apartheid ideology and as such, exemplified "spaces of separation and power". Similarly, she draws an analogy between Lefebvre's conception of 'differential' space and post-1994 urban transformations which have taken place in South African cities. For instance, as a result of colliding and conflicting social, economic, and political forces, Johannesburg, (in my view, more so than other South African cities), has evolved from a regulated, apartheid city, designed and built on principles of control, segregation and exclusion, to a heterogeneous, polyglot, Pan-African city. Post-apartheid and post-colonial emphases on transnationality (as opposed to nationality) align conceptions of identity with issues of space – personal, cultural and/or geographic – implicating issues of belonging, displacement, nomadism and the Diasporic. Dissolving constructs, states of flux, heterogeneous social forms, and negotiated identities characterise Johannesburg as a space of post-colonial hybridity.

Writing in 1998, ten years prior to my writing this introduction, Robinson (7D) pertinently poses a series of questions which probe the ways in which we were/are dealing with Johannesburg in its hybrid, heterogeneous state. She asks:

is the post-apartheid society producing new spaces? Are these fragmented and singular city spaces being reused, reimagined? What sorts of dreams and plans have begun to reshape the cities? Are they still shaped by elements of abstract apartheid spatiality? To what extent are the visions for remaking apartheid space productive of difference? To what extent has Lefebvre's 'representational space' been a source of new types of spaces?

Whilst the contributions to this collection are by no means intended as a comprehensive reflection of the ways in which South African cities have begun to be reshaped over the past ten years, I suggest that they might be indicative of the variety of proactive and creative ways in which Robinson's questions are currently being addressed. Whether it is through spatial practices or through representation of South Africa's urban spaces, the contributions point to ways in which academics and applied researchers are representing, re-conceptualising and re-negotiating South African urbanity. For example, contributors reiterate the possibility of differential spaces as forming out of, or in contrast to, abstract space. These differential spaces might be linked to those aspects of abstract space which draw on cultural and historical sources, and which have the potential for constituting spaces which are 'other' to those dictated by the dominant order.

Emerging across both the contributions questioning spatial practices and representations of space are concerns with certain social implications which pertain to Johannesburg, and the broader context of South African urbanity. In this respect, South Africa's legacy of apartheid is implicit in, and forms a heavily weighted backdrop to each contribution. These social implications suggest the dystopic (interestingly, two writers include the word 'dystopia' in their titles; a similar sense of dystopia is suggested in the not uncontroversial⁶ exhibition title *Cities in Crisis*). NEP editor, John Phillips (2008/11/07), who was present at the colloquium, notes that this dystopic sensibility

follow[s] the paradigm of spatial government taken to historical extremes under apartheid and the imperative to maintain the tactical evolution of indeterminate spaces and activities alongside the nomadic hybrid aspect of the urban and social environment.

It is in the space between these two positions which Phillips outlines, that we might identify a kind of 'third' or indeterminate space, whose symptoms are identification with that which is liminal, fractured, fissured, Diasporic and/or nomadic. These dissolving constructs, states of flux, hybrid social forms and new negotiated identities might be aligned with what post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1990:221) terms a 'Third Space'; a space of hybridity which "enables other positions to emerge ... [which] displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom." In this sense, Johannesburg, as Robinson proposes, is a 'differential space'; a fluid, heterogeneous, 'unformed' space which is constantly in states of transience, transition and emergence. As is evident in certain essays, cultural production in Johannesburg – a polyglot, melting pot of culture, language, experience, religion, nationality and ethnicity – gives rise to new, hybrid forms borne out of a productive, creative syncretism with the city.

To my mind, these states of transience, transition and emergence form a consistent thread which underpins the contributions. Interestingly, this post-colonial reading of a Johannesburg as a 'third' or 'differential' space is articulated in numerous contributions through references to the *flâneur*,⁷ hybridity, spaces of indeterminacy, discontinuity, alienation and displacement, which in turn, are set up against perceptions of the urban orders and oppressions of 'western modernity'. Despite their current applications to the post-colonial, post-apartheid context of South African urbanity, many of these concepts originated with the 19th-century European city, and can be traced back to the 20th-century 'modern city' both of whose representations, to an extent, belong to an ascendancy of classical urban literature.⁸

The modern city and the global city, (usually within certain limits and always *mutatis mutandis*), could, in theory, be read fairly consistently across several exemplary sites, such as London, Paris, New York. Whilst Johannesburg shares characteristics of these 'global cities' it is, as is increasingly becoming the case for many global cities, a space of indeterminacy. Contingency is the norm; the *modus operandi* which creates interruptions and divergences from the global model. It is these divergences which allow us to think of Johannesburg in terms of a megacity, or, at least as displaying characteristics of megacity phenomena. These divergences and interruptions are integrally linked to the history and structure of the site itself.

This recurrent, contemporary interest in contingency, emergence and precarity implies a specific kind of engagement with Johannesburg, and a broader South African context, through acknowledgment of the city's particular dilemmas, which are integrally linked to its apartheid history. Phillips pinpoints one of these dilemmas as being "the political imperative for social justice; to supplant all traces of institutional apartheid by a more inclusive and representative order - which must not destroy historical remains in the drive for urban renewal". Continuing this line of thought, he notes that this dilemma

... turns on ... identification of the tension between a historicist urbanism (following the traces and fault-lines of a historical development and requiring historical analysis) and a neo-liberal turn to the modernist element of the democratic global city (not the tabula rasa but a kind of ideal of renewal under the rubric of social justice).

Thus, whilst several contributors draw on ways of conceptualising South African urbanism, which have their roots in 19th-century literary discourses in order to point to an identification with the liminal, fractured, fissured and/or nomadic, these western theoretical paradigms are applied to Johannesburg, as a 'third' or 'differential' space. These structural tools therefore reveal a synchronic similarity over time, yet their specific manifestations, as per the contributors' (and my own) usage of them in relation to post-apartheid South Africa, reveals those diachronic differences which complicate the simple transposition of these theories from one time-space moment to another.

These theoretical paradigms thus have currency for academics and applied researchers working in South African urban studies, yet are located within arguments which are integrally situated within South Africa's specific historical contingency of apartheid. This historicity is articulated through space. Shadows of cultural/historical/political specificities fall across these engagements with South African cities, changing and influencing these well-established, westernised ways of thinking around South African urban phenomena. It may thus be argued that although these terms have their genealogies in western thought, the ways in which they are applied in this collection acknowledges the specificity of apartheid whose shadow falls across them in marked ways. This acknowledgement allows these western thought-paradigms to function in the present South African cultural-historical moment in ways which are fundamentally different from how they could be applied to other sites. Given that they are

working within this unique nexus of Johannesburg's past and present, the contributors to this collection engage these modernist urban theorists in profoundly innovative ways.

Acknowledging the importance and innovative nature of this engagement, Phillips (2008/11/05) suggests that many of the essays provoke the sense that these frameworks require dismantling or at least, adjusting. Probing further, he invites us to consider the question: "Is the identification of aspects of the 'modern' or even 'global' city still adequate to the situations being described and engaged with [in a South African context]?" Johannesburg might be considered a megacity in that it poses significant deviations from the set of norms usually associated with the modern and the global city - a factor which, ironically, it brings us back, in full circle, to those debates around global megacities which were discussed at the colloquium. It raises questions as to how these disjunctive dystopian social issues, so specifically rooted in Johannesburg's historicity, might be alternatively addressed. Perhaps one way might be by taking on the challenges to current theoretical paradigms that megacities collectively pose. But, then again, perhaps it is in the context of another project that we might open these specifically localised questions out to wider issues of megacities in the 21st-century.

Realising both this volume and the colloquium itself has been a mega-production, whose success has been dependant on the generous assistance, input and support of many individuals. My thanks go to my assistant, Lee-At Meyerov, for her work on co-curating the video evening and valued assistance in organisation of the colloquium. Many thanks to all who participated in and presented their work at the colloquium and to those who have generously contributed their work for publication in this collection. My gratitude goes to Michael Godby and Dave Southwood, for providing the RC with the opportunity of hosting the *Cities in Crisis* exhibition as part of the colloquium, and, in so doing, making possible many opportunities for thought-provoking debate. Grateful thanks go to Eben Keun, Ilan Green and the design team at Breinstorm Brand Architects for the mega-hours of work they so enthusiastically and proactively put into the design process.

Many thanks to Michael Stevenson, Cape Town, the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg and Cape Town, the Obert Contemporary Gallery, Johannesburg, Momo Gallery, Johannesburg, and Warren Siebrits Contemporary, Johannesburg, for granting permission

to reproduce images by artists associated with their galleries. Special thanks to each of the artists for their kind permission to reproduce their work in this collection.

I am indebted to John Phillips and Hilton Judin for their insightful and incisive readings of the papers and critical commentaries, both of which have served to re-shape my thinking around the collection and this introduction, in challenging and constructive ways.

This introduction is informed by and reflects on issues taken up in several email conversations between John Phillips, Ryan Bishop and myself. I am most appreciative to both, for providing me with the opportunity for such enriching interchange. And to Ryan, I extend my heartfelt thanks for his enduring patience, attention to detail, intellectual input and support, throughout the process of realising the colloquium. His virtual presence throughout played a major part in making it the success that it was.

Endnotes

1. Please refer to Appendix 1, 'The Johannesburg and Megacity Phenomena colloquium' for a detailed overview thereof.
2. The term 'practice-based research' is used here to denote a form of praxis – practice following theory following practice – in which both are given equal weighting as *bona-fide* research.
3. See Mocke Jansen van Veuren's article 'Intersection: An Instance of Spatial Usage in Urban Johannesburg', on pages of this collection, for a brief overview of Lefebvre's definitions of 'spatial practice'; 'representations of space' and 'representational space'.
4. A critical difference to Lefebvre's description of how abstract space might be articulated which is evident throughout this collection, is how artists, writers, designers and architects are far from descriptive in the ways in which they articulate their deep engagement with the urban.
5. The exhibition *blank Architecture, Apartheid and After* (1998) was produced on the occasion of 'South African Seasons' – a year of exhibitions and activities on South Africa in Rotterdam. The exhibition was exhibited at the Netherlands Architecture Institute, Rotterdam, from 16 December – 30 March 1999, and thereafter, at Museum Africa in Johannesburg, as part of the Second Johannesburg Biennale in 1999.
6. See for instance, Anthea Buys' review of the exhibition *Cities in Crisis*, on pages 250-253.
7. This term derives from the 19th-century European city, whose representation, to an extent, belongs to an ascendancy of classical urban literature. For the 19th-century French poet, critic and translator Charles Baudelaire, the *flâneur* was a refined gentleman city stroller who walks the city to experience it, yet, whilst doing so, remains a detached observer. In Baudelarian terms, the *flâneur* has significant meaning as a referent for understanding urban phenomena and modernity. While Baudelaire's aesthetic and critical writings opened-up the modern city as a space for exploration, Walter Benjamin (1973) adopted the concept of the *flâneur* as an analytical tool and as a lifestyle. From his Marxist perspective, Benjamin describes the *flâneur* as a bourgeois dilettante who is a direct product of modern life and the Industrial Revolution; a parallel to the advent of the tourist. For further discussion on the *flâneur* as this figure is referenced in this collection, see Elfriede Dreyer's essay entitled 'Dytopia in Kudzani Chiurai's Representation of Globalising Johannesburg' on pages 146-155; James Sey's essay 'Art and the Discursive City' on pages 156-163 and Bronwyn Law-Viljoen's essay 'Photographing Johannesburg' on pages 192-209.
8. Each of these terms has its origins in Modernist literature, forming part of an urban lineage which runs from Charles Dickens to Edgar Allen Poe to Baudelaire. For instance, terms such as alienation and displacement are the hallmarks of early urban experience in the 19th-century.

References

- BENJAMIN, W. 1973.** On Some Motifs in Baudelaire, in *Illuminations*. Glasgow: Fontana: 152-196.
- BHABHA, HK. 1990.** The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha, in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by J Rutherford. London: Lawrence & Wishart: 207-221.
- BISHOP, R.** (ellrb@nus.edu.sg) (2008/11/13). Email communication with L. Farber. Email to: (leoraf@uj.ac.za). Accessed on 13 November 2008.
- LEFEBVRE, H. 1991.** *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- PHILLIPS, J.** (elljwp@nus.edu.sg) 2008/11/07. Email communication with L. Farber. Email to: (leoraf@uj.ac.za). Accessed on 7 November 2008.
- ROBINSON, J. 1998.** (Im)mobilizing Space – Dreaming of Change, in *blank Architecture, Apartheid and After*, edited by H Judin & I Vladislavić. Rotterdam: NAI: 7D.